GENERAL ISRAEL PUTNAM

MOST PICTURESQUE CHARACTER IN AMERICAN LIFE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Little in Romance to Surpass the Experiences of "Old Put"—Once Tied to the Stake and the Fagots Set Ablaze by Indians, Who Started to Burn Him After He Had Been Tomahawked.


PUTNAM'S ESCAPE AT HORSENECK


PUTNAM RESCUED BY MOLANG

SAMPLE OF PUTNAM'S SPELLING

Copy of Letter to Washington

"Pickskill, ye 24 Sept., 1778.

"Dear ginrol—Larst night I received a Leator (letter) from collo (Colonel) Spencer informing me that the enimy had Landed at the English Naborwhod (neighborhood) and were on thar March to hakensack (Hackensack). I immedat called the ginrol ofesors togather to consult what was beast to be don It was concluded to Examin the mens guns and Cartridges * * and to have them ready for a March at the shortest notis when it shuld be thot beast or on receaving your Orders. I waited som tim for further Intelligane but hearing non I rod down to Kings fary and on my way met 4 men with thar horses loded with bagig going back into the contry which said they cam from within 2 milds (miles) to tarytown, who said the Enimy had com out of new York in 3 larg colloms won (one) by the way of Maranack and won by tarltown and won had gon into the jarsys (Jerseys) Just as I had got to the farry I meat won Capt Jonston with a Leator from Collo hay (Colonel Hay) which informed me the Enimy had got as fur as Sovalingboro church and was incamped there and it said thay war (were) waiteng for a wind to bring up the ships the Enimy are colecting all the catel sheap and hoggs thay can in this setuation shuld be glad of your Excelanceys orders what to do.

"I am sir with the gratest Eslem

"Your Humbel Sarveant ISRAEL PUTNAM."

BY RICHARD SPILLANE.

It is remarkable how close a parallel can be drawn between the marshals of Napoleon and the generals of Washington. Nearly every one of the commanders in the American Revolution had his prototype among the generals of division or of brigade under Bonaparte.

In the army of Napoleon there was a man untutored, big, bluff and brave, who perhaps was more beloved by the common soldier than any other in all the legions of the great Corsican. He could read very little and write less. When he did write it was difficult for any one to decipher his meaning. He had his own style of letters and his own method of spelling. His wife could neither read nor write, but she was as great a favorite in the Grande Armee as was her distinguished husband. The man was Lefebvre, Marshal of France, Duke of Dantzic; the woman was his wife, the duchess, better known to-day as Madame Sans Gene.

In America Israel Putnam was Lefebvre's counterpart. He was as much beloved, he was as bluff, as big, as brave and almost as untutored. No rules of grammar, no rules of orthography, hampered the Yankee general. There is nothing more strange, nothing more ludicrous, than his letters and his official reports, as found in the historical archives. He was the most picturesque character of American life in the eighteenth century. As Madame Sans Gene followed her husband's fortunes in the field and was the idol of the common soldiers, so, too, it was with the wife of Israel Putnam. She died in the camp on the Hudson.

As a soldier Israel Putnam never can be ranked high. He never was fitted for the high position to which he was appointed. He never should have been a major-general in the Army of the Revolution. It is doubtful whether he was fitted even for a brigadier-generalship.

No one knew his incapacity better than Washington. No one had less idea of it than Putnam. But he was a glorious figure in the War of Independence nevertheless. He blundered every now and then, blundered egregiously, but his were errors of the head and not of the heart. There was never a braver, a more patriotic soldier than old Israel Putnam. No man endeavored more. As a major or as a colonel he would have been magnificent. He simply was not the born commander. He could handle small bodies of men admirably, but large ones confused him. He was obstinate, he acted on impulse, not through careful study and reasoning. He differed from Lefebvre in only one particular. Lefebvre always obeyed orders; sometimes Putnam did not.

The old witch town of Salem that has given many great men to the world was his birthplace. It is strange to think that he should have been so odd a writer and so atrocious a speller when his people were among the leaders in that ancient settlement, well to do, well educated and cultured. But if he did not learn to read and write well in old Salem town he certainly did learn how to be healthy and strong. He was a massive, powerful man, with a great chest, big arms, strong hands, a great head, and delighted in feats of strength. Just after he reached his majority he emigrated to Pomfret, Conn., and it was there that he achieved distinction by a wolf hunt that has become one of the classic stories of New England.

In the French and Indian Wars that began in 1755 and lasted for seven years, Putnam got his first military experience. He went out as a lieutenant in a Connecticut company and served at first as a ranger under those stupid commanders, Lord Loudon and General Abercrombie. Putnam fought the Indians, fought the French, did a little scalping now and then, just as did the enemy, was caught in ambush several times and had some marvelous escapes from death, but it was not until he had been in the service three years that he passed through one of the most remarkable adventures that a man ever has undergone and lived to narrate.

In a fight near Lake George, Putnam was attacked by an Indian chief. As the Indian rushed upon him with tomahawk uplifted Putnam leveled his gun and pulled the trigger, but it missed fire. The next instant the Indian was upon him and bore him to the earth. With the assistance of several other Indians Putnam was bound to a tree, so that during the remainder of the battle, that swept to and fro as one side or the other gained ascendency, the tree to which Putnam was tied was near the centre of the hostilities. Half a dozen times Putnam's friends got within ten or twenty feet of him, but they were always borne back by the tide of battle. In one of the stages of the fight the English were driven far back and a French officer approached the tree where Putnam was bound and taunted him with the defeat of his party and amused himself by throwing his tomahawk at the helpless prisoner, seeing how close he could come without hitting him, and testing his nerve. Putnam begged the Frenchman to kill him if he intended to do so and put him out of his misery, but the Frenchman replied by striking the captive a terrific blow on the jaw with the butt of his musket. Then he left him. Putnam's jaw was broken. A little later an Indian came along and amused himself by throwing his knife at the victim. Then another Indian appeared and wantonly drove a tomahawk into Putnam's cheek, scarring him for life. At last when the French and Indians saw that the fight was going against them, they released Putnam and took him with them on their retreat. They loaded him with heavy burdens. He had nothing to eat for a long time. His captors stripped him of his moccasins and he marched with bleeding feet all that night.

They continued their retreat until they were well away from the scene of battle. The next day the chief who had captured Putnam appeared, and Putnam asked that if death were to be his portion, that he might be killed at once, and thus be spared needless torture. The chief relieved the half-dead man of his burdens, promised him better treatment and acted toward him in the most humane manner. After he had departed, however, some of the other savages determined to burn the prisoner. They tied him to a tree, brought faggots and set them afire. A shower came up and extinguished the flames.

When the rain had passed the Indians rekindled the fire. Putnam was not tied so tightly that he could not move somewhat. As the flames darted at him on one side he would strain at his bonds and slip away as far as possible. But soon the fire on the other side left no alternative to choose between and he was despairing of his life, when suddenly a French officer named Marin, better known among the Indians as Molang, came dashing up. He had heard from an Indian boy of the plan to burn Putnam, and had hastened to prevent the barbarity. He kicked the faggots to one side, released Putnam and threatened the Indians with death if they maltreated him further. But although Putnam was relieved from immediate danger of death he was in a very serious way. He had been terribly burned and his wounds had left him so weak and exhausted that he could hardly stand. In addition to that his broken jaw prevented him from eating. Caughnawaga, the Indian chief who had captured him, nursed him back to health. He soaked biscuit so that Putnam could swallow the food without trouble. Throughout the remainder of the long march to Montreal he was as careful of his prisooner as though he had been a babe.

For five or six months Putnam was a captive in Montreal, and then was released and returned to his home in Connecticut. But in a few months he was given a command and once more was a forest ranger. He had been promoted to the rank of major. When the blunderers Loudon and Abercrombie were supplanted by Amherst the whole phase of the war was changed and Putnam came into a good deal of prominence. He had the confidence of Amherst and was one of the most useful men among his lieutenants. He took part in the capture of Ticonderoga and in the invasion of Canada by way of Lake Ontario. When Amherst made his attack on Montreal Putnam's services were invaluable. A French warship appeared at the eastern end of Lake Ontario and Amherst's forces were in a serious plight. Putnam proposed to Amherst that if he would give him a few men and a few wedges he would put the warship out of commission. Amherst laughed at the idea, but that night Putnam and three picked men in a small boat crept stealthily under the stern of the warship. With the wedges he so fouled her rudder that the next day the vessel was unmanageable. After that Amherst believed that anything Putnam proposed was possible.

With the close of the French and Indian War Putnam was able to give attention to his farm for a year or so, but at the first sign of hostilities he was back at the front once more. This time it was in an invasion of Cuba. He was second in command of the Connecticut force that joined with the regulars in the siege of Havana. The ship in which he sailed was wrecked by a hurricane on the coast of Cuba, and he and his command drifted about on rafts for days, narrowly escaping becoming food for sharks. For three days they were marooned near Cartagena without food or water. Then the storm subsided and they were picked up by the fleet. The siege of Havana cost more lives through disease than by bullets, nearly one-third of the English force dying from smallpox or yellow fever before the surrender of the city. There never was an emptier and poorer victory, for Great Britain gave up Cuba soon after the taking of Havana.

Putnam returned to Connecticut poorer than when he departed, but that did not prevent him from promptly enlisting for service in the Pontiac War. He spent nearly two years in this, most of the time in the neighborhood of Detroit. Then followed a period of peace. Once he led a party of adventurers to the Mississippi, going by sloop from New York to Cuba, thence to Pensacola, and from there to New Orleans. Putnam planned to establish a big settlement on the Mississippi, to take up a large tract of land and become the lord of the Southwest. But the Natchez Indians made it uncomfortable for the adventurers, and neither the British King nor the Spanish King had any use for such an enterprise, so Putnam and his party returned to the North with nothing but experience to show for nearly a year of labor.

War's wild alarms were under way when Putnam reached home. It was the beginning of the acute stage in the train of events that brought on the Revolution. Putnam, by reason of his experience in the French and Indian wars, in the siege of Havana, in the Pontiac War, and by his vigorous, quick ways, was looked upon as the military leader of Connecticut.

There was a report of a massacre in Boston. This turned out to be false, but Putnam gave an evidence of how many men he could bring into service within a short time by gathering nearly 20,000 within four days. The assemblage of this big force so alarmed General Gage at Boston that he began repairing the defenses of that port with the utmost activity.

In those raw days of the Revolution Putnam showed his strength and his weakness quite as much as he ever did. He never stopped to reason; he was guided altogether by impulse. He was extremely good natured, kindly and considerate.

The news of the battle of Lexington was the big event for which Putnam had been waiting. He hurried to the front at once. At the battle of Bunker Hill there was no commander. General Ward was old and overanxious. Although Putnam was nearly sixty he was fiery spirited and as impetuous as a boy of sixteen. Dr. Warren tried to keep the balance between these two men. There is no doubt that Putnam did better service at the battle of Bunker Hill than he did at any other place in the Revolutionary War, and that the great result accomplished by the raw troops that day in holding the British regulars was owing to his inspiring example and great courage. He was the foremost figure, too, in the work following that engagement. He was so restless and active, so energetic that he never let the men remain idle; he kept them intrenching, kept them stirred an busy morning, noon and night. He was ever ready for a fight. His was just the spirit to keep alive the intense feeling of that day. If he had not been restrained, probably he would have gone right into Boston.

When Washington arrived and took command he discovered immediately the worth and weakness of Putnam. Thereafter the two men were the most steadfast of friends. Upon the evacuation of Boston Washington sent Putnam to take command at New York. Putnam had been made a major-general. New York was a Tory town, and he had a great deal of trouble in keeping the patriots from massacring the leading loyalists.

But the patriot army was not to hold New York long. The British force from Boston had gone to Halifax to recruit, and with reinforcements from England the combined body entered New York harbor and encamped on Staten Island. It was the biggest fleet that New York had ever seen. There were eighty-four sail in the armada. Then came the battle of Long Island. In this Howe outgeneraled and outmaneuvred the Americans in every way. It may have been the fault of Washington, it may have been the fault of Putnam, and it may have been the fault of Sullivan that the British flanked the Americans and put them to rout. The best authorities are inclined to believe that most of the fault was Putnam's. At any rate the Americans were beaten and had to retreat across the East River and prepare to evacuate Manhattan Island. If General Howe had not been the most dilatory of men he could have captured the whole American force before it got away from Brooklyn, and later could have captured Putnam and about one-third of the American army on the lower end of Manhattan Island.

Howe had crossed over to Kip's Bay, and after a skirmish near Thirty-fourth Street and East River he proceeded leisurely to the Murray Hill district, up near where the Waldorf-Astoria is to-day. There he stopped at the Murray mansion and accepted the hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. George Murray, the parents of Lindley Murray, the famous grammarian. Down at the lower end of the island Putnam was busy getting all the American troops and patriot families ready for departure. All that was necessary for Howe to coop up one-third of the American force was to throw a line of troops across the island. But just then he was busy eating the Murray venison and drinking the Murray wine and apparently did not think of it. So Putnam escaped with his beaten army to the Heights of Harlem. It is a strange thing the parents of the man long famous as America's greatest grammarian should have been the means of saving the American soldier who had the least respect for the rules of grammer or organized methods of spelling.

Whatever may have been Putnam's sins of omission in the battle of Long Island, he had none to account for in the battle of Harlem Heights. There he was under the direction of Washington and had the sort of fighting he had been accustomed to in the French and Indian wars. He drove back the advance guard of the British, and it was only by the most urgent orders that Washington could restrain him fram carrying the attack to the main body. But Washington could not remain in Harlem and had to retreat to White Plains. He had to give up Fort Washington and Fort Lee and then to retreat to the Jerseys. Putnam was placed in command at Philadelphia, and busied himself in throwing up defenses for that city, for the British fleet was expected there. Those were dismal days for the patriot army. The first ray of sunshine came that Christmas morning, when Washington fell upon the Hessians at Trenton and then stirred Cornwallis with the affair at Princeton.

Washington then sent him to take command in the Hudson Highlands. This was a position of too much responsibility for the forest ranger. To the northward Burgoyne was coming down from Canada; to the southward the whole British force, under Howe and Clinton, was assembling for an expedition. Putnam was sure that it was to ascend the Hudson and to join Burgoyne, and was fearful of the result. He urged Washington to send him reinforcements. Washington, calmer, cooler, clearer-minded, believed that Philadelphia or Boston was Howe's objective. When Howe finally departed for Philadelphia, Washington raced across New Jersey to meet him, ordering Putnam meanwhile to detach various regiments to support the main army. Putnam did not think that he had enough men for himself and hesitated.

When Sir Henry Clinton came up the Hudson Putnam defended Fort Montgomery and Fort Clinton to the best of his ability, keeping the British busy and doing really excellent work. Even after the surrender of Burgoyne, when it was evident that the British plan for piercing New York and cutting the Colonies in twain had failed, Putnam did not send reinforcements to Washington. It was only when Alexander Hamilton, the aid de camp of the commander-in-chief, went to Putnam and peremptorily ordered him, threatening him with court-martial, that he obeyed. Putnam had his own plan and thought it was a good one. He believed that with a few men he could make a dash down the Hudson to New York City and capture that stronghold. That would be glorious and something spectacular, but unfortunately New York was not worth a 2-cent piece to the American army so long as the British fleet was on the waters. Putnam would have had to evacuate the city within ten days. That did not make any difference to the stubborn old fighter. He would have made the attempt just for the moral effect. Washington, patient, kindly, considerate, fully aware of all Putnam's shortcomings, did not complain. He pointed out to him repeatedly how vain were his projects.

The trouble that arose from this matter finally led Putnam to ask for a court of inquiry and also for a leave of absence. His wife, who had accompanied him on his campaigns, had died in camp and he was heart broken. He was relieved of all blame for the loss of Forts Montgomery and Clinton, and was asked to employ his leave by recruiting in Connecticut. He was so wonderfully successful at this that Washington wished him to continue, but the old man persister in his request for active service, and was sent back to the Hudson Highlands again. The following winter the British began troubling the Connecticut country, and Putnam was sent thither. It was then that he met with the famous adventure by which he is best known to the American people, his escape from the British by his wild ride down Breakneck Hill, near Greenwich, Conn.

Putnam was shaving in the house of a Captain Hobby when a force of about 1,000 British approached. Putnam did not have over 150 men near by. With the lather still on his face he rushed out and jumped on his horse and hurried his men to a bit of rising ground to give battle to the British. The Provincials held the English for a while, but had to give way. Putnam started for reinforcements and was pursued by a party of British officers. Putnam weighed something like 200 pounds and was past sixty years of age. Along the frozen highway he raced; close behind him clattered the British, firing at him now and then. Nearer and nearer they drew. It was only a question of moments before they would capture him. The mad chase had lasted but a little more than a fourth of a mile when Putnam reached a turn in the road that led down a steep declivity. Putnam turned his horse from the highway and dashed straight down toward the precipice. He forced his horse over the brow and down the rocky height. The British were at his heels and had difficulty in reining in their horses at the verge. None dared follow Putnam. They sat in their saddles astonished at the general's reckless feat. How a horse and rider ever managed to gain the bottom of that cliff alive is a mystery, but Putnam did it. It is known to-day as "Put's Hill."

The following year he was stricken with paralysis, the whole of his left side being affected. But even paralysis could not hold the old man captive. After a while he improved so much that he was able to be lifted to the back of a horse. Once in the saddle he was the gallant figure of old. Throughout the closing days of the Revolution he was instrumental in supplying more recruits to the army than any other man in the Colonies. He was eager to return to active service, and twice he applied to Washington for a command. He had become the senior major-general of the army after the treason of Lee. He had served in four wars and had been fighting for more than a quarter of a century, but he was not content. It was out of the question, of course, to give him a command, but several times he journeyed from Connecticut to the headquarters of the army, and when he arrived there was always a grand review in his honor.

No officer was more beloved than "Old Put." He was the idol of the common soldier. He typified the undaunted spirit of the young republic. Nothing could chill his ardor. He was a warrior without fear. With peace there came tranquillity into the life of Putnam. Back at Pomfret he led a quiet, easy existence, and there, in 1790, he died in his seventy-third year.